

REITH LECTURES 1979: The African Condition

Ali Mazrui

Lecture 1: The Garden of Eden in Decay

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In the first Reith Lectures to be focused primarily on Africa, in 1961, Dame Margery Perham, the Oxford historian, decided to use a metaphor from accounting. She attempted a 'colonial reckoning', a kind of balance sheet of the costs and benefits of the colonial experience for both the colonised and the imperial powers.

My own metaphor for these lectures is from the medical field. It is as if I were a doctor and Africa had come to me for a comprehensive medical examination on the eve of a particular anniversary. The most important century in Africa's relations with Europe has been from the 1880s to the 1980s. It was from the 1880s that the map of Africa began to acquire more decisively the different flag colours of the occupation powers of Europe. Let us assume Africa has come to my clinic for varied medical tests on the eve of the 100th anniversary of Europe's rape of her body and her possessions. I have therefore called this series of lectures *The African Condition* for two major reasons. One is diagnostic. To some extent this series is about Africa's aches and pains: what is Africa's state of health after 100 years of intense interaction with Europe?

I also chose the title because it echoed the philosophical phrase 'the human condition'. I want to examine the state of Africa partly as a way of measuring the state of the world. Africa is in part a mirror of the human condition. But in a mirror the left hand becomes the right hand and vice versa. The mirror is both a reflection of reality and its distortion. The mirror is a paradox.

My approach in these lectures will exploit paradox as a mode of analysis. Platonists, Hegelians and Marxists all use paradox as a tool for studying reality, but they call it 'the dialectic'. Qualities which are seemingly contradictory are reconciled. Reality is always a unity of opposites.

I have chosen to focus on six paradoxes of the African condition. The first, which I will be discussing in this talk, is the paradox of the Garden of Eden in decay. Africa is probably the first home of mankind, but it is the last to be made truly habitable.

In my second talk I shall address myself to the paradox of an Africa humiliated but not brutalised. Many of you will have seen the two television series, *Roots* and *Holocaust*. *Roots* is a story of black humiliation from slavery to present-day racism. *Holocaust* is a story of the brutalisation of the Jews. Among victims of sheer physical brutality, blacks are not necessarily the worst sufferers. The Jews can match that martyrdom. But among victims of sheer humiliation and contempt, Africans and people of African ancestry have suffered the most in modern history.

My third paradox concerns a clash of cultures. African societies are not the closest culturally to the Western world, but they have been undergoing what is perhaps the most rapid pace of Westernisation we have seen this century. Africans are caught up between rebellion against the West and imitation of the West.

In my fourth lecture my terms of reference will be the burden of Africa's underdevelopment. A continent rich in resources is poor in performance - a well-endowed region of the world accommodates what the United Nations regards as the poorest countries in the world. Why this paradox of poverty-stricken millions in the golden continent?

Then we have the paradox of a continent large enough to be Jonathan Swift's Brobdingnag, but inhabited by minute Lilliputians. Among the continents of the world Africa is second only to Asia in size but it is fragmented into more than four dozen little Lilliputs.

I will argue in my fifth lecture that an understanding of this fragmentation is essential if we are to diagnose accurately the nature of Africa's aches and pains.

My final lecture will look at Africa's physical location on the globe in relation to its economic, political and military destiny. Geographically, Africa is the most central of all continents, but politically and militarily it is probably the most marginal. What are the implications of this paradox, and how is Africa to get out of the prison-house of political dwarfs situated in the middle of the City of Man?

I want to start this talk with some observations about Africa's place on the world map. If you look at a modern map based on the Mercator projection North America appears to be one and a half times the size of Africa. It is difficult to believe that Africa is, on the contrary, three and a half times the size of the United States. Even Greenland seems to be almost the same size as Africa, which is, of course, preposterous, since Greenland is only a fraction of Africa's size in square miles.

The Briesemeister projection of more recent times attempts to give an elliptical equal-area focus, presenting the different continents in relation to square miles. Visually, Africa emerges as the second largest of the inhabited continents—trailing behind only Asia.

Yet the majority of maps, in African schools use the Mercator projection in portraying the world.

The distortions of the size of the continent arose partly out of the decision of cartographers to equate the north of the world with the top of the world. Neither on the rounded globe nor on the flattened map is it scientifically necessary for Europe to be above Africa. On the whole, the decision to make the Arctic Ocean up and Antarctica down was an accident of the history of science, rather than a necessary logic of the cosmos. We like to think of our planet revolving in the Milky Way, with Greenland at the top instead of at the bottom. But if we could imagine ourselves as spectators from the opposite side of the globe we might have to readjust our deeply ingrained images of up and down as the equivalent of north and south.

In historical terms the Northern Hemisphere, in the last five hundred years, has indeed moved up, in terms of scientific skills and technological know-how. The north has also been up in terms of the Industrial Revolution and the economic pre-eminence it has bestowed upon the countries of Europe and North America. Above all, the north has been up politically in the last 200 years, as it has conquered much of the world, and has maintained control over much of it to the present day. These senses of 'up' are real.

What is unreal is the distortion of the geographer, the ethnocentrism of the Western cartographer. Africa might have been denied its full credentials as an aspect of human civilisation, but must it also be denied its size in square miles? Can we not begin to experiment in schools with maps and globes that are less distorting?

Karl Marx attempted to put Hegel the right side up—restoring the primacy of material conditions over ideas. Future mapmakers may need to put the globe the right side up—restoring a much needed status to Africa, where human history first began.

Recent archaeological discoveries increase the probability that if there was a Garden of Eden where the first man and woman lived it was probably located in the African continent. This evidence has provided ammunition both to racists and to African nationalists. The racists attempted to take us back to social Darwinism and the old theories of the 'Great Chain of Being'.

The old theory was static and was based on the ancient idea that God had so organised the world that the universe and creation were arranged in a 'Great Chain of Being' — that all creatures could be classified and fitted into a hierarchy extending from man down to the smallest organism.

Newspapers and public speeches in Southern Africa are today less likely than they were a couple of decades ago to express the more blatant neo-Darwinism regarding blacks as the missing link between apes and human beings, but ideas of this kind persist at the subconscious. And much of the insistence on racial segregation in the relations between white people and black people in Africa has been due to a deeply ingrained superstition that blacks were a different and lower species.

In African nationalism and romantic thought, on the other hand, the discovery that Africa may be man's first home touches a chord of pride. The archaeologists provide ammunition for those who would insist that Africa was the original Garden of Eden. This particular view of the nature of original Africa links up with ideas about the age of innocence in Africa well before Europe desecrated the holy kingdom.

One important school of romantic thought in modern Africa goes under the name of Negritude. It is apt to drift into an exaggerated portrayal of traditional pre-colonial Africa as a Garden of Eden. The mood of this branch of African romantic thought is one of nostalgia—yearning for an innocence which is eternally lost. If Africa was once the Garden of Eden its inhabitants today are ill at ease within it. This earliest home of man has a crisis of habitability. Many parts of it are not yet fit for human habitation.

We need, I think, to divide minimum liveable conditions into three kinds. To begin with, there are the ecological conditions, such as climate and the nature of the terrain. How suitable for relatively comfortable human life is the physical environment in Africa? Then there are the technical conditions of habitation. How easily available are the technological skills of survival in Africa? Then there are the *socio-political conditions* and the degree to which these make a place congenial to relatively peaceful human existence. Have present-day Africans made such a mess of their social and political arrangements that the place has become less suitable for civilised existence since the Europeans tampered with it, rather than more?

As far as minimum ecological conditions of habitation are concerned the European impact has been progressive. Europe hasn't, of course, changed Africa's climate but it has enabled Africans to understand rather better processes like soil erosion and what is nowadays referred to as 'desertification'. Understanding the ecology is the first step towards either controlling it or adjusting to it.

Closely related is Europe's impact on the technical conditions for habitation in Africa. Important skills have found their way to Africa through the colonial transmission belt. Africa is now better equipped to deal with disease and to build roads and railways than it was before European penetration and colonisation. This is part of the brighter side of the bequest of the white man.

The negative impact of Europe has been more on the socio-political conditions of habitation. Europeans destroyed African institutions of authority and government and have left a major political gap. The rules of living together which prevailed in the pre-colonial period, the values and collective responsibilities of traditional social life, were replaced by artificial norms imported from Europe. One African country after another experimented with such artifices as the Westminster model. One country after another had to distinguish one so-called 'tribe' from another—while at the same time forcing them to live within the same national boundaries. One country after another experienced new class formation without acquiring the necessary capability to resolve conflicts.

Over a third of the total number of refugees in the world are in black Africa — depending upon how one defines a refugee. Many Africans have fled from their homes as a result of tyrannical governments or irreconcilable ethnic cleavages: Uganda until the overthrow of Idi Amin; and Ethiopia since the revolution which overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie. All this is on top of the vast numbers that have been running away either from racial domination or racial warfare in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa.

The African refugee problem is less visible because African countries themselves are rather small. Until this year, little Equatorial Guinea had one-third of its population in exile. But when you add the number of refugees together the problem is larger per capita than the refugee problem anywhere else in the world, apart from the Palestinian diaspora. Migration of people is a great measurement of habitability. Refugees are often people voting with their feet, a mobile referendum on the march.

But perhaps of greater international implications is African migration to the developed industrial countries, especially the Western world. We may be witnessing

the most significant wave of African migration to the Americas since the end of the slave trade. The migrants will not be helpless captives from African villages, rustic and bewildered, but will be some of the most sophisticated Africans in history. The brain drain from Africa will be gathering momentum in the 1980s. The migrants will be either seeking refuge from anti-intellectual dictatorial rulers or will be seeking new economic or academic opportunities for themselves. These migrants are what we might call the black Pilgrim Fathers, running away from the crisis of political habitation in Africa.

But what about the non-Africans who reside within the African continent? What is to be their future?

The answer has varied from one part of the continent to another. At least in the urban areas, Kenya has successfully maintained a multiracial society. On the other hand, in Uganda Idi Amin ruthlessly threw out thousands of Asians, and, less directly, made conditions increasingly difficult for all foreigners, as well as for his own people.

But the ultimate question of cohabitation between Africans and non-Africans is of course dramatised in South Africa. Is the white man in South Africa there to stay? And, if he continues to struggle to ensure that he does stay, to what extremes will he carry his defence?

Clearly a different crisis of habitation looms large in Southern Africa. Many blacks of the region have fled across the border in search of political refuge. Many white liberals have also been on the run from the perversions of apartheid.

But there is no point opposing apartheid on false premises. On the basis of experience elsewhere, black majority rule will not necessarily be more humane; it will simply be less racist. Many black South Africans living as refugees elsewhere have been torn between white racism and black arbitrariness—between the white devil and the deep black sea.

An Interesting example is the black South African writer, Ezekiel Mphahlele. Even at the time of maximum African nationalist euphoria in the 1950s and 1960s Mphahlele refused to buy romantic notions of innate African instincts for compassion and justice. In a brilliant hyperbole he shocked some of his Negritudist listeners at a meeting in Dakar in April 1963, in the following words:

Some day I'm going to plunder, rape, set things on fire; I am going to cut someone's throat; I am going to subvert the government; I am going to organise a coupe d'etat; yes, I am going to oppress my own people; I am going to hunt down the rich, fat black men who bully the small, weak black men and destroy them; I am going to become a capitalist, and woe to all those who cross my path or who want to be my servants or chauffeurs, and so on; I am going to lead a breakaway church—there's money in it; I am going to attack the black bourgeoisie while I cultivate a garden, rear dogs and parrots; listen to jazz and classics, read 'culture', and so on. Yes, I am also going to organise a strike. Don't you know that sometimes I kill to the rhythm of drums and cut the sinews of a baby to cure it of paralysis?...

By putting an extra emphasis on violence Mphahlele has reminded us that strife and cruelty have a lot to do with the decay of the Garden of Eden. In fact, Mphahlele remains one of the least violent human beings I have ever met. But as a black South African in exile he witnessed the crisis of habitation in black Africa. Later on he was one South African exile who decided it was time to go home—and suffer with the people.

How long will the suffering last? There has so far been no precedent of any white settler community in Africa effectively in control of the local situation giving up power without violence. In every African country which had a sizeable and controlling white minority a military challenge was necessary before black majority rule could be introduced. This includes my own country, Kenya, which had to experience the Mau Mau war from 1952 to 1960 before settler control could be broken. The Algerian war from 1954 to 1962 was another dramatic challenge to white settler power, backed for a while by the Establishment in Paris. Angola and Mozambique, in their very different ways, were comparable illustrations. And now we have had the agony of Zimbabwe Rhodesia.

It is inevitable that the last bastion of white control, the Republic of South Africa, will have to undergo a similar challenge in the years to come. The revolution in South Africa has ultimately to come from within, as the blacks become increasingly radicalised, and their capacity to organise and fight improves. That is how I see the situation developing. Under international pressure the Republic of South Africa will increasingly liberalise its system, in fits and starts, two steps forward, one step backward. But as a result of that liberalisation the opposition to the system will find it much easier to organise itself. In time the opposition will include a radical and effectively organised and armed challenge to the white establishment.

The African homelands, or Bantustans, created by the white establishment may then have to be re-colonised by the whites for security reasons, as acts of sabotage within the white areas increase, and the black homelands serve in part as areas of temporary refuge for guerrillas.

South Africa's neighbours, like Mozambique and black-ruled Zimbabwe, will also have to brace themselves for Israeli-like reprisals from South Africa if they serve as hosts, unwillingly or willingly, to South African guerrillas. They will become the Lebanons of Southern Africa—on the one hand serving as a reluctant host to liberation fighters and guerrillas, and on the other hand suffering as victims of reprisals from south of the border.

Perhaps in anticipation of such eventualities the Republic of South Africa and the State of Israel have engaged in extensive consultation over their predicament as isolated societies with hostile neighbours. These consultations have included questions of counter-insurgency. The Israelis have been relatively effective in containing the Palestinian threat to their own security, and the South African white establishment is interested in learning from Israel's experience.

But will whites ever leave South Africa or will they fight to the last Afrikaner? I think there is a lot of foolish romanticism about the Afrikaners. It goes back to the Boer War and even farther back to their proud trekking into the hinterland of Southern

Africa. I agree that Afrikaners have more to lose than English-speaking white South Africans, but I am not persuaded that the majority of them would rather die than seek refuge elsewhere. The majority of any society, any race, any nation, are relatively pragmatic when it comes to issues of life and death. The Afrikaners will fight, yes—they will kill and be killed for a while—but when the cost really becomes too high the exodus will begin.

Nor do I believe the argument that the Afrikaners have nowhere to go. That is sheer nonsense. If there is a revolution in South Africa I haven't the slightest doubt that many Western doors will open for them. The Netherlands may prefer for the time being to maintain a political and moral distance from her sons and daughters in South Africa, but when the racial chips are finally down, and Dutch-speaking whites are on the run from black revolutionaries, it will open its doors, partly for reasons of kith and kin, and partly for reasons of its own tradition of humanitarianism.

By that time Africa's crisis of habitability will have hit Africa's last remaining white conquerors—and a large proportion of them will seek more habitable surroundings elsewhere.

And yet I don't expect South Africa to cease being a multiracial society. A third, or even half, of the total white population may leave when the revolution comes, but a million or two will remain behind to work out an alternative deal with the blacks and attempt to rebuild a fairer society. Later on other whites will enter the republic, if only as businessmen and other kinds of temporary residents. It is conceivable that by the end of the century the proportion of whites within South Africa over blacks will remain relatively the same, while power has effectively shifted to the black majority. But half the whites need not be the same people. Kenya, for example, has more white people today than there were before black majority rule was conceded. But the proportion of the old-style settlers has dramatically declined.

The long-term solutions to Africa's crisis of habitability depend on the continent acquiring two things: the capacity for self-pacification and the capacity for self-development. Self-pacification would involve Africa in controlling its own political and social excesses, ranging from tyranny to corruption, from border wars between states to the exploitation of women.

Self-development includes defining goals in relation to available means, and cultivating the will to pursue those goals with as much self-reliance as possible. Excessive dependence on outsiders is part of the imperial malaise, and Africa should find ways of transcending it.

But how? Yes, how? That question will continue to haunt us as we explore other aspects of the African condition in the coming weeks.